

## Candidates jockey to replace Senate's environmental 'heavyweight champion'

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With Vermont independent Sen. James Jeffords retiring after more than 30 years in Congress, environmentalists mindful of his record on clean air and climate change are keeping an eye on candidates for his Senate seat.

"There's no question [that Jeffords] has been the heavyweight champion of clean air in the Senate, particularly in recent years," said Frank O'Donnell, executive director of the advocacy group Clean Air Watch. "We will be losing the undisputed heavyweight champion" on environmental issues.

While the list of potential candidates for Jeffords' seat has changed in recent weeks and no one has formally announced their intent to run, most observers see a likely face-off next November between independent Rep. Bernie Sanders and Republican millionaire Richard Tarrant.

If Vermont's political history offers any clues, whoever runs will find it difficult to keep environmental concerns off their agenda. "You couldn't run for Senate unless you're pro-environment in Vermont, and so I assume all of the candidates will be taking positions similar to Jeffords'," said Gregg Easterbrook, a visiting fellow with the Brookings Institution.

At 71, Jeffords is the ranking member on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. His stature among environmentalists was enhanced by his bombshell decision in May 2001 to leave the Republican Party, a move that handed control of the Senate to the Democrats for 18 months.

During his 1 1/2-year stint as chairman of the environment panel, Jeffords moved a controversial power plant bill through committee aimed at forcing dramatic reductions in air emissions, most notably of carbon dioxide. He has been a loud critic of Bush administration environment policies and has effectively blocked White House bids to rewrite air pollution rules.

Environmental issues have loomed large in state races since Gov. Deane Davis (R) pushed through a 1970s law that forced new development projects to meet resource-protection criteria. Vermont has since banned forest clear-cutting and passed its own Clean Air Act, which taxes vehicles getting less than 20 miles per gallon. On Capitol Hill, former Sen. Robert Stafford (R) and Jeffords have between them given Vermont a seat on the Senate environment committee for 24 of the last 34 years.

Frank Bryan, a political science professor at the University of Vermont, said Jeffords' successor would have to have a "huge" interest in agriculture and the environment to

compete. "We're an agriculture state, or were at least," he said. "Our environment here is our biggest resource."

But Easterbrook says that while Jeffords has been one of the "key people" in the Senate on environmental matters, his replacement can relax about living up to his legacy. "He has a mixed legacy because for the past five years the only thing he's done was prevent progress in devoting himself mainly to blocking Bush's initiatives," Easterbrook said. "He's been pretty ideological about nothing that Bush wants getting through his committee."

## **Possible challengers**

Lt. Gov. Brian Dubie's (R) recent decision not to run for the Senate in lieu of a bid for a third term, left Tarrant as the likely frontrunner on the GOP ticket. Having never held elected office, Tarrant made his money by founding and leading a medical software firm, I-D-X Systems.

Also expected to seek the Republican nomination is 51-year-old retired Air Force lieutenant colonel and charter pilot Greg Parke. Parke ran unsuccessfully against Sanders in 2004, losing by a whopping 68 to 24 percent margin.

Parke's views on climate change and air pollution regulation differ sharply from Jeffords'. When asked whether Congress should regulate the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide as a pollutant, an issue key to legislation promoted by Jeffords, Parke said he considered the idea "ludicrous." Carbon dioxide "is not a pollutant," he said. "If you look throughout history, scientists will tell you that increased levels of CO<sub>2</sub> were directly responsible for the increase of healthy plant growth."

Regardless of their differing views on environmental issues, political analysts say that candidates will have difficulty matching the Jeffords' legacy.

"They're not going to have the same level of commitment to environmental issues as Jim [Jeffords] did, but they're obviously going to have to step up to the plate in that regard," said University of Vermont political science professor Garrison Nelson. "Jim had a 40-year career of going after polluters, I mean this was clearly a primary concern for Jim. It's not a primary concern for Bernie or Richie."

Sanders, a self-described socialist, "has also been quite strong on the environment," boasting a 94 percent lifetime score with the League of Conservation Voters, said the group's legislative director Tiernan Sittenfeld. "Sanders is definitely a staunch environmentalist, and he definitely tends to almost always vote in a pro-environment way."

But Nelson thinks that Sanders will be less focused on conservation than Jeffords. "I think Bernie is going to worry about energy costs, he's going to go after the big oil companies, he's going to worry about home heating fuel," Nelson said. "So I see Bernie

as being less active in conservation as Jeffords but very conscious of high energy costs and their impact on people's lives."

## **Early polling**

A WCAX-TV/Research 2000 poll released earlier this month shows Sanders leading Tarrant 64 percent to 16 percent. The nonpartisan poll interviewed 400 likely voters between Oct. 31 and Nov. 1, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 5 points.

Experts agree that anyone facing Sanders, who has won eight statewide contests for the House and four elections as mayor of Burlington, will be in for a tough fight.

"I think Tarrant has a good chance to beat Bernie, but the smart money right now is on Sanders," Frank said.

Tarrant has put \$500,000 of his own money into his campaign and is refusing funds from the National Republican Party and any outside interest groups or PACs. "Vermonters are represented in Washington and not outside interest groups," Tarrant spokesman Tim Lennon said. "Unfortunately outside money has ties attached to it."

But Nelson does not think Tarrant's money will help him beat Sanders. "I'm not sure a self-funded campaign will really convince Vermonters that [Tarrant] understands their lives," he said.

Lennon said it was too early in the race to take specific positions on issues but did note that climate change is "an area where America needs to show leadership."

"Obviously we'd want to build on the positive work of Sen. Jeffords and those that came before him," Lennon said.

But while speculation abounds, analysts point out that much can change between now and election day. "To be honest, I think it's too soon for anyone to worry," O'Donnell said. "For all we know the entire control of the Senate could be in different hands in 12 months, so it's too early really to make any kind of judgments. But I think people will be watching the situation in Vermont very closely obviously."